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## Cleaning woman trusted son to carry on empire, but it wasn't in the cards

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© September 3, 2006

Last updated: 5:06 AM

Six lawmen walked up to the brick ranch house in Portsmouth before dawn Feb. 9. Nathaniel Alexander Jr., the man they had come to arrest, answered the door, groggy and bewildered.

This surely was not what Rosa Mae Alexander envisioned 20 years earlier when she entrusted the family business to her youngest son.

Rosa's story was the stuff of Hollywood:

A woman pushing 50 and moonlighting as a janitor goes into business for herself. She starts small and works hard. The company flourishes, and she makes millions of dollars, lifting dozens of other black women out of poverty along the way. Then she pours her hard-won wealth and influence into enriching the lives of others.

Nathaniel Alexander's story also could have been crafted by a Tinseltown script writer,

A highly respected high school teacher and coach cuts short his career in the classroom after his mother asks him to join her business. He appears destined for similar heights, winning acclaim as the region's top minority contractor in 1990. But things start to go wrong. Through the years, contracts dry up. Profits dwindle. Companies go under.

Today, 3-1/2 years after his mother's death, he stands accused of talking part in a multimillion-dollar counterfeit check and bank fraud operation that also ensnared two Olympic gold medal track stars and raised questions about a third.

A family enterprise built from nothing is gone. A family name, gilded through countless acts of generosity on the behalf of the community, has been sullied.

How did it come to this?

State Sen. Harry B. Blevins was the principal at Great Bridge High School in Chesapeake when Nathaniel Alexander taught there in the 1980s.

"Some people have a suspicious nature, and other people have a trusting nature," Blevins said. "I think Nate was trusting rather than suspicious."

**Rosa Alexander** was a late bloomer. A child of the rural cotton-and- tobacco South, she was raised in Dunn, N.C., by parents of modest means who instilled in her a strong work ethic.

She was a grandmother when she decided to go into business for herself in the late 1970s. She had spent two decades as an electronics mechanic trainee and helping to manage the restaurant at the Ford assembly plant in Norfolk while working nights as a cleaning woman.

Armed with a business license, two buffers, six buckets and one employee, she started A&B Janitorial Service.

She quickly landed a \$49,000 contract at what was then Norfolk Naval Base.

"After one week, I knew I needed three more people," she told a reporter at the time.

One job led to another, and, in 1979, to a \$1.9 million contract at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth. She spent so much time at the yard she opened an office there. She worked seven-day weeks, mopping beside her workers, sometimes sleeping on a makeshift bed amid 500-gallon drums of industrial cleaner.

With the aid of a federal program designed to benefit small, minority employers, she won contracts totaling more than \$3 million. Her work force swelled to more than 300 people, many of them women she helped take off welfare rolls.

"She was one of the most determined individuals I've ever met," said Harrison Wilson, a former Norfolk State University president and friend of Rosa's. "She wasn't going to let being a woman keep her down."

Rosa was a strong believer in self-reliance.

In 1984, an autographed picture of President Reagan adorned a wall in her office on Lafayette Boulevard in Norfolk. To those who questioned her fondness for the conservative Republican, she said, "When the door is open to you, he wants you to walk through it, not have someone pull you through it."

**The woman on the elevator** with Mal Nicholson in 1981 wore bib overalls. She asked him why he looked so sad.

He explained that he was an assistant vice president at Norfolk State University, which was having trouble raising money for band uniforms. Nicholson and the woman were leaving a meeting of business contractors in downtown Norfolk.

"Maybe I can help you," she said.

When Nicholson visited her office at the naval shipyard the next day, she pledged \$5,000 for band uniforms from her janitorial business.

That was the beginning of Rosa Alexander's relationship with Norfolk State.

As her business flourished, she became one of the university's most generous benefactors. She gave money for band uniforms and outfitted the "dancing girls" who performed with the band. She financed football scholarships and bought books for the library.

Once, when four students who worked at her business received their NSU diplomas, she quietly slipped an envelope into their pockets. Inside each envelope was \$1,000 in cash.

When NSU celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1985, Rosa took the stage during a celebratory bash at the then-Holiday Inn-Waterside and announced a donation of \$50,000 for football scholarships.

"The place just exploded," Nicholson said. "This was money coming from a black lady who started out with nothing."

Wilson, NSU's president during the years of Rosa's benevolence, said, "Of all the people who have helped Norfolk State, she was the one who started with the least."

Dick Price, a former NSU coach and athletic director for whom the university's stadium is named, remembers Rosa as a devoted fan of NSU's sports teams. She often wore green and gold, the school colors, to football games, Price said.

He said he always saved her a space right up front at Foreman Field, where she parked her beige Lamborghini with dark-brown trim.

Rosa never went to college but adopted Norfolk State as her alma mater.

"She didn't have much formal education," Price said, " but she had a Ph.D. in people."

**By the mid-1980s**, Rosa Alexander had made her fortune and was looking for new challenges. All five of her children had worked for her company, by then called A&B Contract Services, which had won millions of dollars in contracts to provide cleaning services for military installations.

That's when she chose Nathaniel to be her successor - a decision that Blevins said created conflicts for the young teacher who coached track and football. Alexander liked what he did and was good at it, Blevins said.

Why Rosa picked her youngest son is not clear, and family members have declined to grant interviews.

Meanwhile, she set out to restore the blighted, drug-infested Park Place section of Norfolk. She and a business partner

spent \$650,000 for residential and commercial properties along 35th Street. After a time, a drug patrol was set up there, and tenants began moving into apartments she leased.

She took on another, equally daunting, task: leading the effort to build Norfolk's Martin Luther King Jr. memorial, which for years had been a magnet for controversy.

From the day the Norfolk City Council approved a resolution authorizing the monument in 1975, its most visible champion was Joe Jordan, a Norfolk judge and human rights activist. He envisioned the memorial at the intersection of Church Street and Brambleton Avenue as a symbol of black pride and achievement.

Fundraising languished, however, and when Jordan died in 1991, the project's boosters were far short of their \$450,000 goal.

Rosa took over the campaign. Some disheartened contributors asked that their money be used to finance a lesser project, such as a statue of King, but she stayed true to Jordan's ideal.

Bishop Levi Willis, a minister who owned radio stations that catered to black audiences, donated air time to Rosa to solicit donations on WPCE. Night after night, she sat behind a microphone in a Church Street studio, beating the drums for the MLK monument.

Her incessant pitches caught the ear of Hunter A. Hogan Jr., a white real estate magnate.

"He heard me on the radio, and he called and said, 'Lord, that woman hasn't gotten that money yet?' " Rosa said in a 2000 interview.

Hogan rallied other white business leaders to the cause, and eventually a biracial effort raised the money to build the memorial: an aluminum spire on a granite base in the hub of Norfolk's black community.

When the memorial was dedicated in January 2000, Rosa Alexander, her health beginning to fail, was there to bask in its success. It was the fruit of Jordan's vision and Rosa's sheer will.

"She saved the King memorial," Nicholson said.

Rosa Alexander was a tall woman with a regal presence. When she died Feb. 27, 2003, she was afforded a farewell befitting a queen.

More than 1,000 mourners packed the pews at Garden of Prayer Temple on Church Street five days after her death at age 74.

She was remembered as a woman who cooked Thanksgiving dinner for her Park Place tenants, paid for Norfolk State students to fly home to attend relatives' funerals, fixed a roof for a friend in need and donated land for the construction of a church.

Her obituary noted that she had met presidents during her years as a celebrated minority businesswoman. She once spoke of writing a book chronicling the story of her life. Her proposed title: "From the Outhouse to the White House."

At her funeral service, Nathaniel Alexander asked the assembled mourners how many of them she had helped in her lifetime, Nicholson said. Nearly every hand in the church went up. Recalling that chance meeting on an elevator many years earlier, Nicholson stuck his hand in the air.

"She was a remarkable lady," he said. "She wanted everybody to share with her in the American dream."

**In February**, Nathaniel Alexander opened the door at his Portsmouth home to half a dozen men with guns and badges. One of them was Ruben Correa, a member of the El Dorado Task Force, which investigates major financial crimes in New York and New Jersey.

Correa, who works for the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement, told Alexander he was under arrest and issued him his Miranda rights as the two men sat at the dining room table.

The agents found Alexander to be a rare breed of criminal suspect - well-mannered, even helpful. They asked Alexander's wife and son to get Alexander his street clothes so they could take him in for questioning.

Alexander wanted to know why his house suddenly was full of federal and local law agents. Correa told him it was "something that had to do possibly with check fraud."

At that point, according to Correa's July testimony in a New York courtroom, Alexander said, "I know what this is about," and started telling me the story about a check."

The agents asked whether they could search his house, and he said yes, even though they had no search warrant, Correa testified. They asked whether he had financial records, and he told the agents where to find the briefcase that contained them.

The agents handcuffed Alexander, a standard procedure, and they headed for the Norfolk immigration and customs office.

During the drive, an agent mentioned that they had been unable to find one of Alexander's accused co-conspirators, Steve Riddick - a gold-medal-winning track star and a friend and business associate of Alexander's.

Alexander said Riddick's phone numbers were programmed into his cell phone. Norfolk customs agent Peter Joseph drove back to get it, according to Correa's testimony. When he returned, Alexander started making calls, and before long, the agents located Riddick in Bentonville, Ark., where he was arrested.

**On March 29**, less than seven weeks after his arrest, Alexander was interviewed in New York by Erik Rosenblatt, the lead customs enforcement agent in the bank fraud and counterfeiting case. Alexander is one of 10 remaining defendants; two have pleaded guilty.

Alexander is charged with depositing two counterfeit checks totaling \$1 million into accounts in his name and his business's name, though the checks failed to clear and no money was paid out. His New York attorney, Michael Fineman, says his client is innocent and was the victim of a ruse orchestrated by the operation's ringleaders. Fineman has advised Alexander not to discuss the case before trial.

During the March interview, Alexander described a series of business ventures in which he had been involved. One of them, Vision Learning Center, a six -year-old Chesapeake child-care center he operates with his wife, is solvent and apparently profitable. Others, some at his business office on Tait Terrace in Norfolk, have been less successful.

He said he was working with a man named "Mr. Simon" in a business called T2KW, which stands for "tires to kilowatts." Alexander was hired to gather rubber tires for conversion into an energy source, he told Rosenblatt.

Alexander said he had not yet done any work for T2KW.

Another venture involved an unspecified medical device invented by a Dr. Jerome Kennedy. The device's design was stolen by a foreign company, Alexander said, but the case is in litigation, and when it is settled, Kennedy wants to distribute it from the Tait Terrace office building.

Alexander told Rosenblatt he worked with Beynon Sports, a company that installs running tracks. Alexander said he was negotiating two contracts for the company, one with the city of Hampton and the other with the University of Pittsburgh. He also said Riddick had contracted for a total of \$9 million to install tracks in the Bahamas and St. Kitts.

Alexander acknowledged that he did not have a "formal agreement or contract" with Beynon. John Beynon, president of Beynon Sports Surfaces Inc., said he had met Riddick, but the company has no contractual arrangements with Alexander or Riddick.

Another business Alexander described, also located at the Tait Terrace address, was B&T Petroleum Recovery, which he said cleaned fuel tanks on military vessels.

He said he was recruited into the business by its founders, Theron Atlas Bumpers and James Thorogood, who left after company revenues plunged and employees were let go. Efforts to reach Bumpers and Thorogood through a mutual relative were unsuccessful.

Alexander told the agents he had engaged in another business deal with Bumpers: Mr. A's, a company that provided

cleaning and food services for military shipyards.

The company was beset by financial woes, federal records show. It was awarded \$1.7 million in federal contracts in 2000. That amount plunged to \$51,000 two years later, and the contracts dried up completely in 2003.

The company was terminated Feb. 2, 2004, for failing to pay a \$100 registration fee and file an annual report, according to State Corporation Commission records. The company was the last corporate vestige of the business Rosa Alexander had started a quarter-century earlier.

**During the interview with Rosenblatt,** Alexander said Riddick had contacted him last year to say he had found a buyer for his foundering company, B&T Petroleum.

The sale, Alexander told a customs enforcement agent, was to include equipment and the building on Tait Terrace, which he said had been willed to him by his mother.

Alexander said he did not know the name of the buyer or buyers, only that Riddick said they were "the real deal" and "had a lot of money." Riddick operates a sports training business from the Tait Terrace address, according to court records.

A couple of days after his conversation with Riddick, Alexander said, Riddick called to say a check had arrived, and Alexander picked it up. It was made out to B&T Petroleum in the amount of \$850,000.

Alexander said he thought the buyer's name was "Pete " but that he knew nothing else about him. He said he took the check to an attorney, who told him not to give up any of his assets until he had a signed contract.

When Alexander showed the check to a local SunTrust Bank branch manager, "her eyes got big," he said in the interview. At his request, he said, she contacted the issuing bank to make sure the money was available, then suggested he open a new account to deposit it so he wouldn't commingle the money with funds in an existing account.

After depositing the check April 26, 2005, he said, he wrote starter checks on the new B&T Petroleum account. His signatures appear on each check. Even so, he said that one check, made out to a man named Ephraim Richardson, looked "strange " and that the signature and payee "looked crazy," agent Rosenblatt wrote in a summary of the interview.

Richardson, one of those charged in the fraud case, has since pleaded guilty in federal court in New York and was sentenced in July to five months in prison and ordered to pay \$25,500 in restitution to two banks.

Alexander said he contacted the branch manager a few days after depositing the check and discovered that it had failed to clear. He said he was not concerned about the source of the check, Rosenblatt noted, adding that Alexander said, "This entire deal doesn't make sense."

A few weeks after the first check bounced, Alexander said, he received a second check for \$150,000 that he thought was payment for equipment and his salary. He deposited the check in his personal account. It also bounced.

"Looking back," Rosenblatt wrote, "Alexander sees how strange everything is."

One of the checks Alexander wrote on the \$850,000 account was made out to track and field superstar Marion Jones for \$25,000. It was endorsed and deposited in her account but never paid out because the \$850,000 check didn't clear. Jones, who won three gold medals in the 2000 Olympics, has not been charged in the case.

Alexander is charged with five counts of bank fraud and money laundering. He, Riddick and Tim Montgomery, another Olympic gold medalist who has trained with Riddick, are scheduled for trial April 2.

And B&T Petroleum, like Mr. A's, is now defunct. According to State Corporation Commission records, it was terminated Jan. 3, five weeks before Alexander's arrest.

**Rosa M. Alexander Hall**, a three-story women's dormitory near the heart of the Norfolk State campus, opened in 1983. Inside the entrance hangs a portrait of its namesake, a handsome woman with high cheekbones and oversize eyeglasses, stylish in a scarlet suit and matching hat.

Every Christmas, Nicholson said, Rosa sponsored a day long feast at the home she and her husband built on Fernwood

Farms Road in Chesapeake. She cooked the seafood herself and invited all the employees of her cleaning business.

Today her 89-year-old widower, Nathaniel Sr., still lives in the sprawling house, which features a white grand piano on one level and a fully stocked, restaurant-size bar on another. A wall to the right of the entryway is covered with dozens of neatly arranged plaques, awards and certificates commemorating the achievements of Rosa's lifetime.

Nathaniel Sr., convinced of his son's innocence, chooses not to discuss his wife's legacy until the court case is resolved.

Nicholson recently recalled how, many years ago, Rosa told him, "I am with you when you are right, and I am with you when you are wrong."

Then she pointed her finger at him and added, "I am with you when you are wrong to help you to get it right."

"That is a part of her legacy," Nicholson said. "She wanted to make everything right."

He reflected on her life and works and how her family's golden name has been tarnished.

"I'm disappointed, saddened and hurt that her name is remotely connected to this in death," he said. "And she can't even answer."

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